Xenophobia in Spite of Citizenship: Seasonal Migrant Workers in Brazil

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Introduction

Brazil is well known for its diversity. With its sizable indigenous population plus descendants of Europeans, Asians, and the largest population of people of African descent outside of Africa, the country boasts a cornucopia of ethnicities and races. Furthermore, the long history of miscegenation has produced a society in which racial lines are often blurred and skin color can have ambiguous meaning. Generally speaking, the darker-skinned, Afro-descendent population tends to be concentrated in the northeast, where their African ancestors initially arrived enslaved and were forced to work on sugar cane plantations. While mobility—both pre- and post-emancipation—has resulted in the presence of different races throughout the country, the northeast still tends to have the highest concentration of people of African descent. Sugar cane workers who migrate seasonally from the northeast to the south have expressed that they experienced discrimination in the southern towns where they temporarily reside, contradicting the much-touted perception of Brazil as a racially harmonious society in which the mixing of races diminishes racial prejudice. The long history of the enslavement and forced labor of Africans and resistance to their emancipation continues to mar contemporary Brazilian society through persistent inequality that is

most profound along racial and color lines. Contemporary inequality propagates the existing chasms in Brazilian civic engagement.

This article argues that race is not universally defined, and although Brazilians have not adopted U.S. paradigms of racism, racial classifications, or racial hierarchy, colorism remains pervasive and is compounded by socioeconomic class. Migrant sugar cane workers in the plantation regions of southern Brazil contend with discrimination and xenophobia and are defined by their skin tones, which tend to be darker than those of the local population. Furthermore, given their limited education, limited economic means, and their seasonal occupation, other migrant workers also place them in a marginalized position. Brazil has a wealth of natural resources and a resilient economy, affording it significant development potential, yet its regional and global influence are hampered by notorious inequality that excludes a sizeable portion of the population from the benefits of its resources. Development that is not inclusive is not sustainable. The United Nations considers the reduction in inequality to be essential to sustainability, as indicated by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and popular uprisings around the world are demonstrating public weariness with pervasive marginalization and inequality. In Brazil, the tension between increased awareness of racial inequality and intolerance for racism on the one hand, and the blatant celebration of bigotry exemplified by the recent election of Jair Bolsonaro on the other, suggest that the country's racial inequality is unsustainable and consequently ripe for change. This study is based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with 45 adult sugar cane workers and their partners, all of whom have traveled from the state of Maranhão to the rural town of Guariba, São Paulo, for the sugar cane harvest season.

The Myth of Racial Democracy in Brazil

A number of scholars have referred to Brazil as a racial democracy since the 1940s, including Arthur Ramos, Roger Bastide, and Charles Wagley, who contributed to the popularization of the term (Norman 2011). Still, it is most commonly associated with the work of Gilberto Freyre, who as early as the 1930s argued that the circumstances of Brazil's racial pluralism had produced a society of racial equality and harmony (Bailey 2004, 728-47). Although racial democracy is often conflated with the endorsement of *mestiçagem,* or racial mixing, and the concepts are related, they are distinct. Freyre advocated miscegenation as both an indicator of the absence of racism in Brazil and a means of fostering and maintaining racial equality through the creation of a singular national identity based on racial mixing (Sheriff 2008, 89), which would

essentially whiten the population (Covin 2006, 35). The notion of Brazil as a racial democracy advanced the perception of Brazil as a color-blind society, in sharp contrast to countries such as the United States, which, at the time (in the early to mid-twentieth century), remained in the midst of racial inequality, tension, and outright conflict. The ideology was not only widely accepted in Brazil, but was also embraced as part of the public narrative of Brazil's reconciliation with its history of slavery and the subjugation of the black and dark-skinned population. Afro-Brazilians were less receptive to the ideology, but were excluded from the mainstream academic discourse, so it was not until white Brazilian scholars recognized the limitations of the racial democracy ideology that it began to be more widely discredited (Andrews 1996, 490). By the latter part of the twentieth century, recognition of the reality of Brazil's racial inequalities and tensions—supported by evidence of racial inequities in education, income, and occupational advances, among other indicators—undermined the once-popular concept and resulted in its widespread criticism. For example, in 1950, of a population of 16.5 million Afro-Brazilians, only 48,000 had graduated from high school and 4,000 from college (Andrews 1996, 493), reinforcing the contention that racial democracy was aspirational at best. Further, a 2011 study by the Data Popular Institute also indicates the structurally entrenched racism that limits the upward socioeconomic mobility of the black and brown populations: the wealthiest class of Brazilians was 82.3% white and 17.7% African-Brazilians, while the poorest class was 76.3% African-Brazilian and 23.7% white (Phillips 2011). Given this context, it is difficult to support the concept that Brazil is a racially egalitarian society in which black and mixed-race people have access to the opportunities that their white peers enjoy. Still, as recently as the late 1990s, Andrews has argued that because criticism of racial democracy tended to originate outside of Brazil and critics have remained largely in the minority, there are still members of the Brazilian elite who conveniently continue to embrace the idea of Brazilian racial exceptionalism (Andrews 1996, 487).

Espousal of the ideology of racial democracy is not just a matter of dogmatic preference. The denial of racism that is inherent in the assumption of racial democracy denies the existence of structural impediments to dignity and upward socioeconomic mobility by means of equal access to education or employment. As Guimares (2001) notes:

> In Brazil, denying the existence of race is interpreted as a denial of racism as a system. The recognition of the idea of race and the promotion of any anti-racist action based on this idea is interpreted as racism. Therefore, many manifestations of discrimination based on color are peremptorily denied as

having any racial motivation. Race is invisible in Brazil; only color exists, defined by objective, concrete characteristics, independent of the idea of race.

Pervasive poverty in the northeast, which is most acute among darker-skinned Brazilians, is an indicator that racial equality is a myth. Further, the discrimination that migrant sugar cane workers reference as part of their experience in the sugar cane fields of the south support the perspective that structural racism and racial discrimination remain the reality.

Discrimination against Migrant Sugar Cane Workers

Carl N. Degler's 1971 statement that "the farther south one travels in Brazil the more intense the degree of prejudice" (Degler 1971, 99) seems to hold true today, as migrant sugar cane workers interviewed in Guariba for this study discussed discrimination as a fundamental aspect of their experience as migrant workers. What was curious about the conversations, however, was that very few respondents—only two—specifically referenced race as the reason for the discrimination that they encountered. Respondents described their status as migrants from the northeast and their occupations as manual harvesters of sugar cane, both of which positioned them at the low end of the socioeconomic hierarchy. One 19-year old male respondent who was, with his cousin, on his first season as a sugar cane harvester in Guariba, made the following comments:

> We don't like going to town. When we walk through the stores, the sales people follow us around. They think we are going to steal their goods when all we are trying to do is buy what we need. They think we are criminals. We avoid shopping in their stores if we can, but sometimes we have to. They know we are from the northeast and they make fun of us and say we are dirty and don't wear clothes or shoes because we like to wear flip flops. They don't know that this is how we dress in the northeast. They act like they don't understand our accent, but we understand theirs. We are all Brazilian, but they treat us like we are different.

In response to my question regarding spending their earnings in local shops, restaurants, or bars, another respondent stated:

> I don't go to the bars in town because they don't want us there. They stare at us and they don't think we have the money to pay our bills. We don't feel comfortable there. We are outsiders and are not welcome. They think we are all thieves and criminals. If anything happens in town or if someone commits a crime, they think we do it. We just want to work, save our money, and go home.

Another respondent, who was not cutting sugar cane at the time but had done so in the past and was the partner of a man who was still working in the industry, stated explicitly:

> They discriminate against us. They don't want us here. They think we are taking their jobs, but they don't want to do this work. If they did, the work wouldn't be here for us to do. We keep to ourselves. It is better when we rent our own houses outside of town. At least we can be together in our community, cook the food that we like, and play the music we like without anybody complaining about us. They don't want us to live in their neighborhoods and if we do, they complain. It is better for us to live amongst ourselves. They prefer when we live here [in the tenements on the outskirts of town], because we are among ourselves, far away from them and their town.

While difference was implied in all contexts, there was rarely a reference to racial, ethnic, or color differences. Rather, the emphasis was on regional, cultural, and occupational differences. Their status as outsiders and being from another region and state was frequently referenced. There were inferences to socioeconomic difference, although neither relative wealth nor poverty was explicitly discussed. There was a greater sense of indignation from the younger participants who, while avoiding explicit reference to race or color, alluded to their own foreignness. These responses parallel those recorded by Mikulak (2011), who observed among her research participants that although they are aware of racism being directed at them, they were not overt in expressing this awareness because, "they are unable to mobilize their own indignation in ways that publically call attention to their marginalization" (Mikulak 2011, 89).

Citizenship

Citizenship is a fraught term in any context, but even more so in a country that, for generations, denied citizenship and its accompanying rights and privileges to the large segment of the population that the ruling class enslaved. The Afro-Brazilian struggle for the rights, benefits, and access to political participation that are characteristic of citizenship has a long history, and Brazil's political history is inextricably linked to its history of importing enslaved Africans for labor. Although formerly enslaved Brazilians were granted citizenship following emancipation, those who were illiterate were denied the right to vote. Given that enslaved Brazilians were denied access to education, this policy effectively excluded the emancipated generation from the full range of rights of citizenship. Although their political engagement manifested in other ways, the initial denial of the right to vote created a social context in which blacks were, and to some extent remain, second-class citizens. This is especially

apparent when they move outside of the northeast and into the predominantly white regions of the south, as is evident among the migrant sugar cane workers in São Paulo. Despite their formal status as citizens, poverty and discrimination limit the inclusion of contemporary black and poor Brazilians. Migrant sugar cane workers in Guariba are relegated to the literal margins of society, living on the outskirts of the town and facing discrimination and exclusion by those who are deemed to belong, those who are descendants of European immigrants. Inclusion by fellow citizens is perhaps even more significant than inclusion by the state. As Kruman and Marback (2015, 2) posit, "The relationship of citizens to the state, then, does not provide a comprehensive definition of citizenship because the potential associations citizens have with each other exceed relationships to the state."

Kivisto and Faist (2007, 16) refer to the potentially equalizing effect that citizenship can have on a population. At least in theory, citizens of a state have access to equal rights. Other scholars, however, have challenged the assumption that citizenship is experienced equally (Kymlicka and Norman 2000), as groups outside of the mainstream such as the descendants of enslaved people remain on the margins of political power. Although the migrant sugar cane workers who travel seasonally between Maranhão and Guariba are equal to the permanent residents of Guariba in their citizenship and the rights that this citizenship guarantees, their status as migrants places them in a position of inequality. According to the migrant workers, permanent residents of the area, regardless of socioeconomic status, treat the migrant community as outsiders in terms of social interaction and property rental. While migrant workers shared examples of situations in which they experienced discrimination, even those who were not directly confronted with discrimination perceived a sense of otherness. While in the abstract sense, migrant workers and residents alike shared citizenship as well as a sense of national identity, this shared citizenship did not translate to camaraderie. Residents at times shared the experience of exploitation at the hands of the plantation owners as they also labor in other areas of sugar cane production besides manual harvesting, which was reserved for migrant workers. Furthermore, migrant workers mobilized in defense of their interests, notably during the Guariba strikes of the 1980s (Eaglin). However, there are limited instances in which the migrant and local workers joined forces in opposition to the plantation owners. The foreignness created by the regional differences superseded shared citizenship and shared interests.

Eakin (2017) describes Brazilian national identity as an imagined community. He asserts that, "nations are cultural constructs that make claims to a collective identity,

social solidarity, and the integration of the individual into membership in the whole,"
and argues that Brazilians built what he refers to as a "national cultural community"
during the second half of the twentieth century. However, this newfound national
identity did not equate to a sense of shared citizenship or political identity. In other
words, a national *cultural* identity was created, but failed to produce an inclusive national
political identity. Although Brazilian national cultural identity fostered civic engagement,
particularly during the transition to democracy in the 1980s, it was soon discredited
alongside ideologies of racial democracy and *mestiçagem*, which were also declining in
popularity by this point. The military regime's use of racial democracy and *mestiçagem* to
buttress their repression of anti-racist mobilizing served as further motivation for black
intellectuals and activists to reject the ideologies. Progress in the black consciousness
movement following the demise of the military dictatorship in 1985 has slowly
continued to advance since then (Nolen 2015).

While the sense of a national cultural identity that developed in the latter part
of the twentieth century may seem to contradict the discrimination that migrant sugar
cane workers experience, Eakin illustrates that the identity formation was short-lived
and confined to a particular historical moment following the transition to democracy.
Further, he argues that:

> When Brazilians experience prejudice, discrimination, and repression, whether
> due to the color of their skin, their accent, or their social class, these actions
> often stem from the cultural constructs of racial, regional, or class identities.
> These identities may be "discourses," but they have concrete and direct impact
> on lives even as these actions reinforce the discourses. At certain moments,
> such as during the World Cup, these discourses might bind millions together
> as Brazilians, while at others they divide them as paulistas, nordestinos,
> gaúchos, or mineiros. Brazilians, like other peoples, live multiple identities
> simultaneously, and identifying with the nation is one of the most powerful and
> encompassing of these identities. (Eakin 2017, 266)

Brazilian national identity, rather than being as much a myth as *mestiçagem*, can be
thought of as a contextualized identity that functions when Brazilians are juxtaposed to
other nationalities, but appears to unravel among Brazilians of disparate races, colors,
levels of education, and socioeconomic classes. Migrant sugar cane workers, who for
the most part are poor, minimally educated, darker-skinned *nordestinos* outside of their
home region, are especially susceptible to prejudice on the basis of these characteristics,
and particularly on the basis of being perceived as encroaching on spaces outside of the
northeast.

Brazil's Contemporary Ethnic Composition

      Sociologists generally accept race as a social construct. Bailey et al. (2013, 106) refer to race as a "contextual and multidimensional social construct," and argue that factors contributing to racial identity include, "self-perception, ascription by others, interactional cues, institutional contexts, and prevailing cultural understandings on consequential markers of human difference." As such, racial identity is fluid and not based on a singular factor or uniform set of factors such as physical features. Furthermore, while some scholars have debated the possibility that upward socioeconomic mobility can enable the transition from one racial identity to another, or "whitening" (Schwartzman 2007), Bailey et al. argue that racial classification is not independent of social status, particularly in Brazil. The inextricable relationship between race and class is evident in the racial boundary-crossing that seems to take place over time, as changes in the country's racial composition as indicated on the decennial censuses are not always explicable by demographic shifts.

      The Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE), which is responsible for collecting national demographic data and conducting the decennial census, uses five categories to define race: *branco* (white), *preto* (black), *pardo* (mixed), *amarelo* (yellow), and *Indígena* (Indigenous). Prior to 1991, IBGE asked census respondents their skin color; since 1991 they have instead asked respondents to indicate their race *or* color (Loveman et al. 2012, 1468). These race/color categories have been criticized for their inappropriateness as descriptors for people (Telles 2004, Loveman et al. 2012). *Preto* or black is typically used to describe objects; when used to describe a person, it refers to someone with a very dark complexion and often carries a pejorative undertone (Loveman et al. 2012). The use of *pardo*, which refers to brown-skinned and/or mixed-race individuals, has been criticized for its use as a census racial category because it is not typically used in Brazilian vernacular. Further, some scholars perceive the use of the term *pardo* as a way to avoid claiming blackness. The 2010 census indicated that 47.7% of the population is white, 43.1% mixed, 7.6% black, 1.1% Asian, and 0.4% indigenous. Of the 45 respondents interviewed for this project, 100% of them self-identified as mixed-race or brown. Although the majority used the term *pardo*, several respondents referred to themselves as *moreno*, which carries a similar meaning and is the more popularly used term for mixed race (Loveman et al. 2012, 1469). This was particularly the case among respondents with whom the interview took a less structured and more informal tone.

The tendency for the participants in this study to self-identify as *pardo* is consistent with a more general trend towards a greater number of Brazilians embracing their black or mixed-race identities. The 2010 census indicated an increase in the black and mixed-race populations and a decrease in the white population. However, there is widespread speculation that rather than an increase in actual numbers of black and brown people, there has been an increase in the number of people who self-identify as black or brown, perhaps shifting away from their prior self-identification (Nolen 2015). Based on the 2010 census, 97 million Brazilians, representing 50.7% of the population, self-identify as black or brown, an increase from 44.7% in the 2000 census. In 2000, 53.7 percent of Brazilians self-identified as white, and this proportion declined to 47.7% (91 million) in 2010 (Phillips 2011). The respondents in this study, all of whom identified using terminology that connotes brown or mixed race, were phenotypically varied. From the researcher's perspective, some of the respondents could be defined as black or as white in different ethnoracial contexts. Their racially ambiguous appearance allowed them to choose their racial category. My speculation with regards to the phenotypically white respondents is that they chose to self-identify as brown or mixed because of their socioeconomic status and position as sugar-cane cutters vis-à-vis the predominantly white, better educated, and more affluent permanent residents of their adopted communities.

Although the ability to choose one's racial identity is not unique, it is more representative of the Brazilian context than other similarly heterogeneous societies. In the U.S., for example, the "one-drop rule" dictated that having any black ancestry renders one black. Although it is now common for people in the U.S. to self-identify as biracial or multiracial, the history of racial segregation is such that people of mixed race that includes black ancestry typically consider themselves black. Similarly, following decades of legislated segregation under apartheid, South Africans now have the freedom to choose their racial identity. However, even in the post-apartheid era, racial categorization remains rigid, with clear distinctions between blacks, whites, Asians, and colored. The latter does not simply refer to the mixed-race population, but represents an ethnic and cultural group whose history makes them distinguishable from those who are the product of contemporary interracial unions. The freedom with which Brazilians are able to choose their racial identity stems from the absence of anti-miscegenation legislation. South African and U.S. laws prohibited interracial unions, whereas miscegenation was encouraged in Brazil in an effort to whiten the population. The result is a large population of people whose spectrum of phenotypes allows them

to defy categorization and gives them the flexibility to choose how they want to identify, which some scholars refer to as racial ambiguity (Telles 2002, James and Tucker 2003, Grier et al. 2014).

Racial ambiguity simultaneously enables those whose physical appearance does not fit neatly into U.S.-centric racial classifications to choose how they want to identify, while also fostering the opportunity for misidentification when others do the categorizing. The idea of racial ambiguity does, however, underscore the arbitrariness of forcing people to claim a particular racial identity. Although racism is very much a reality in Brazil, it is complicated by the way in which higher or lower socioeconomic class can whiten or darken, respectively, those whose racial ambiguity allows them access into multiple racial groups. While the literature has been dominated by the U.S. perspective, which favors a white-black dichotomy, Latin American and Caribbean scholars have embraced more nuanced and inclusive ways of defining race and have long been aware that socioeconomic class can blur color lines. Changes in the racial statistics between the Brazilian censuses of 2000 and 2010, discussed above, further highlight the fluidity of racial identity. Respondents' self-identification and/or census takers' classifications of respondents shifted over time. Similarly, several scholars have noted the significant changes in Brazil's racial demographics between 1950 and 1980 (Mikulak 2011, Telles 2002, Wood 1991). Mikulak refers to the 38 percent decrease in the black population, which coincides with the 34 percent increase in the brown population, suggesting a change in the way respondents self-identified during this period. Based on the same inconsistencies in census-based demographic data, Wood (1991) surmised that some individuals who were classified as brown or black in the 1950 census were classified as white by the 1980 census owing to their upward socioeconomic mobility; apparent demographic changes were unlikely to have been attributable to population change (Telles 2002, 419). In his study of the discrepancy between census interviewers' racial categorization of respondents and the respondents' racial self-identification, Telles (2002) found that educational and socioeconomic achievement influenced respondents' perceptions of their own whiteness as well as interviewers' categorization of them. The wealthier or more highly educated a respondent was deemed to be, the less likely s/he was to be considered black. Telles observes that despite the stipulation that respondents define their own race, census takers often make this determination, "either because they assume they know the correct response category, they feel uncomfortable asking about race, or they rush interviews and provide cursory responses to questions they feel are not critical" (Telles

2002, 415). Further, Telles argues that it is not only phenotype that shapes how one's race is perceived; factors such as dress and speech, which also infer socioeconomic class, influence the perception of race (Telles 2002, 417), adding another layer of complexity to Brazil's already fluid racial categorization.

Consistent with the idea of the variability of racial identity, Schwartzman (2007) argues that the tendency to view changes in racial identity as misidentification or miscategorization represents a dichotomous, black/white approach to racial identity that is rooted in U.S. definitions of race. Instead, she proposes a consideration of shifting racial identity (whitening, specifically) as boundary-crossing. Further, she argues that the upward socioeconomic mobility of some non-whites in Brazil results in a greater tendency for them to identify or be classified as white. While her analysis is supported by that of other scholars (Bailey et al. 2013; Telles 2002), it contradicts the discrepancy between the census 2000 and 2010 demographic data. Growth in black consciousness in Brazil during the late twentieth century (Nolen 2015; Barcelos 1999) suggests the possibility that the increase in the number of people identifying as black or brown is attributable to the continued progress of pride in African ancestry. Whether shifts in racial identity and/or classification are the result of upward socioeconomic mobility, heightened racial consciousness, or other variables, what is evident is that racial identity is flexible and shifts do not only occur between generations, but may even be possible in the same individual.

Conclusion

Although the concept of racial democracy has been widely refuted, there is still considerable resistance to explicitly confronting ethnicity or color as the basis for discrimination. Coming from a U.S. context and observing the cross-cultural dynamics of the interactions between the migrants and permanent residents of the town, I was conscious of the absence of any insinuation that race, ethnicity, or color were factors in the residents' discriminatory words and behavior toward the migrant workers. However, the emphasis on class, region, and occupation rather than on race is consistent with what other scholars have observed of Brazilians' approach to racial division (Mikulak 2011).

Silva (1999, 67) challenges the once-dominant hypothesis that, "social mobility is not influenced by race and that the disadvantaged position of nonwhites in Brazilian society stems from ongoing historical inequalities." While his argument that racial

discrimination is rooted in prejudice rather than in class discrimination stemming from the protracted enslavement of Africans in Brazil, I contend that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Contemporary racial discrimination may well be rooted in the ways in which the Brazilian ruling class has historically perceived Africans and their descendants. As Castro and Guimarães (1999, 85) argue in the same volume, "the initial exclusion and retarded inclusion of *negros* in Brazilian industry is attributed to their delayed proletarianization." They argue that racial discrimination is responsible for reproducing existing inequalities, and describe racial discrimination and the historically entrenched socioeconomic disparities as mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive.

Migrant sugar cane workers in Guariba dwell—for at least part of the year—in a context in which they are perceived as both racialized and foreign. While they express their experience with discrimination as being rooted in their cultural difference and "outsider" status, their cultural identity being from the northeast is entrenched in the African history of the region and the African heritage of much of its population. In contrast, the host communities in the south are steeped in both European heritage and the legacy of the colonial-era hierarchy that assumes European racial superiority. Consequently, the discrimination that migrant workers from Brazil's northeast encounter in the south is rooted in race. Kim and Sundstrom (2014) argue that while racism and xenophobia are intersected and best understood in relation to each other, the two ought not be conflated. Xenophobia, which Kim and Sundstrom define as *civic ostracism* or civic exclusion, typically targets outsiders in the context of the nation-state. Yet as has been illustrated above, owing to Brazil's size and its geographic, socioeconomic, and racial diversity, internal migrants with visibly distinct characteristics can be the objects of xenophobia in their adopted communities. Given the color spectrum of the participants in this study and the consistent and universal sense of exclusion and marginalization that they experience, racism alone does not adequately describe or explain the ostracism that they face. Xenophobia supplements the explanation by accounting for discrimination against individuals who are phenotypically similar to the perpetrators. In southern Brazilian towns such as Guariba, Brazilians from the northeast are effectively foreigners. Although they contend with structural racism, this is compounded by the ostracism that comes from their fellow citizens.

Civic ostracism has become even more pronounced in 2019 as Brazil's political climate has become more hostile to the poor, the marginalized, the brown, and the black with the election of the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro. He is infamous for his

disparaging remarks toward those who fall outside the realm of the white, heteronormative elite, and is celebrated by his supporters for doing so. The policy shifts that have accompanied his presidency represent a stark contrast to the social programs instituted under the leadership of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, whose administration recognized the gravity of equality to Brazil's sustainability. Reduced inequality—both within and among countries—is one of the goals indicated among the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The election of a regressive administration that derides the importance of equality threatens Brazil's sustainability as it erodes policies that support marginalized groups, underscoring the urgent need to acknowledge and confront inequality and discrimination in Brazil.

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